

The isolation of Abkhazia

A failed policy or an opportunity?

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Gali residents cross the Inguri River.

Source: Julia Wishnewetz

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In the wake of the military confrontation over Abkhazia, the Government of Georgia considered a coercive approach appropriate and feasible and sought to isolate Abkhazia, specifically the *de facto* administration in Sukhumi. The aim was simple: to compel the Abkhaz side to abandon its pro-independence policy. The Government of Georgia reckoned on a close relationship with Russia, whose coercive capacity was enormous. Supporters of this approach counted on a swift effect: Abkhazia's economy could not survive provided that the embargo was enforced with sufficient vigour, and the ensuing social discontent would force the *de facto* administration to change policy.

It has become almost a conventional wisdom throughout the expert community that Georgia's strategy of isolating Abkhazia was not well founded. This view, however, overlooks a number of factors that led up to it.

It became clear soon after the 4 April 1994 quadripartite agreement (between the conflict parties, Russia and the UNHCR) on the voluntary return of refugees and displaced persons that the Abkhaz side was unwilling to fulfil its obligations and would hinder the return process by any means, despite appeals from international organizations. UN Security Council Resolution 1036 (12 January 1996) is one of many third-party documents demanding compliance from the Abkhaz side. The *de facto* Abkhaz authorities opted for hostile policies towards the predominantly ethnic Georgian population of the Gali region, who had returned spontaneously to their homes. With a view to continuing the policy of forcible expulsions, Abkhaz militia made regular incursions into the area, allowing torture and killings to take place. Resolution 1036 and the UN Secretary-General's report of 2 January 1996 reflect the international community's deep concern about the matter.

In 1995 the *de facto* authorities initially agreed upon defining the status of Abkhazia within the united Georgian federal state and had signed the Russia-brokered protocol on 24 July. Subsequently, however, they disavowed the document and refused to accept it as a basis for negotiations.

Throughout the conflict, Russia had covertly provided the Abkhaz separatists with arms, ammunition and intelligence and the Russian military participated directly in hostilities on the Abkhaz side. Apparently trying to redeem its fault, Russia feigned impartiality in mediation activities and was even exigent towards the Abkhaz (only later did Russian ambiguity and guile begin to prevail). This was reflected in the content and tone of the overwhelming majority of official documents adopted in that period by the UN, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

However, external political support for Georgia and the instruments available within the UN and OSCE proved inadequate for prevailing upon the Abkhaz side. Thus, a need for major changes in the whole process increasingly became apparent. At the same time, the majority of the CIS member states felt sympathy for Georgia's struggle for the restoration of its territorial integrity and also feared centrifugal tendencies within their own borders. This offered an opportunity and the 1995 CIS Summit adopted a memorandum at Kazakhstan's initiative that provided a legal basis for subsequent steps towards imposing CIS sanctions on Abkhazia.

Fresh memories of the grief and grievances of defeat, as well as the mounting political and social instability that the presence of a sizeable community of displaced persons introduced into Georgian society, fuelled a revanchist public mood. The party of war gained strength and a coercive strategy of isolating Abkhazia increasingly came to be considered as the most relevant policy option.

Structure of Abkhazia's isolation

The isolation of Abkhazia is often incorrectly reduced to the coercive measures adopted by the CIS Summit in 1996. Apart from the CIS sanctions there are five other elements comprising Abkhazia's isolation:

- UN Security Council condemnation. Resolution 876 (1993) strongly condemns the actions of the Abkhaz side in violation of international humanitarian law and "calls on all States to prevent the provision from their territories or by persons under their jurisdiction of all assistance, other than humanitarian assistance, to the Abkhaz side and, in particular, to prevent the supply of any weapons and munitions."

- The Georgian government's rulings (under successive administrations) on closing the port of Sukhumi and the maritime boundary in the Abkhaz offshore waters.
- Georgia's decision not to apply to the International Civil Aviation Organization for a location indicator for Sukhumi airport, which thus cannot be used for international flights.
- The blocked Trans-Caucasian railway through Abkhazia.
- The almost complete absence of economic cooperation between the conflicting sides. The exceptions are the joint operation of the Inguri power station and the alleged illegal cross-border trade between criminal groupings across the region.

These regulations been referred to as a 'blockade,' a term that is inappropriate for several reasons: blockades refer to restrictive measures employed during *inter-state* conflicts and during conditions of belligerency. In this case, belligerency formally ended with the 1994 agreement and restrictions on access were a struggle to assert the sovereignty that neither side was willing to give up. Furthermore, the CIS sanctions are just a set of mutually agreed commitments or obligations of the member states to be implemented mostly by non-military state institutions. Rather than targeting civilians, the CIS sanctions restrict co-operation with the '*de facto* authorities' and admit humanitarian and commercial links provided that the Georgian government is preliminarily notified. Finally, the term is rendered meaningless as Russia has in fact withdrawn from the CIS sanctions and has even granted citizenship to most Abkhazians.

Effects of the isolation

The expediency of sustaining Abkhazia's isolation is now becoming a topical issue in Georgian political discourse. In the absence of the anticipated quick results, the isolation policies stagnated. Nobody argues that they have contributed to reconciling the conflicting agendas in Tbilisi and Sukhumi. Mutual alienation has increased and the already minuscule resources of trust and motivations for seeking a compromise solution have been squandered. Isolation solidifies Abkhaz society's image of Georgia as the enemy, while dramatically reducing the Abkhaz nation's options and leaving it to the mercy of Russia. Mutual distrust sustains support for the party of war, while the reinforcement of Georgia's jurisdiction in Upper Abkhazia (a new toponym for what was known as Kodori Gorge) in 2006 has given birth to a party of war in Abkhaz-controlled territory. Against this backdrop, the prospects for co-operation and compromise are diminished and the resources for engagement and reconciliation seem marginal.